# EXCAVATING THE MIND

Chris (Witmore) is back from Denmark – we are planning fieldwork in Romania, in collaboration with Gothenburg, the Swedish National Heritage Board, and other colleagues from northern Europe.

This is his report on a conference at Aarhus he attended – Excavating the Mind

The Department of Prehistoric Archaeology in cooperation with the Centre for Cultural Research, University of Aarhus recently hosted a conference entitled “Excavating the Mind,” which dealt with the crossovers between cognition, material culture, and social practice. Practitioners from a number of dissciplines came together to deliver papers on topics including semiotics, embodiment theory, material engagement theory, technology and material action, agency, distributed cognition, the origins of the human mind, human sensation. The organizers should be commended on what was a well-connected and organized conference.

Archaeologists continue to struggle with the modernist predicament found in the separation of ideas and things, minds and bodies, agencies and structures. And they continue to do so with an awareness of what is

going on around them in other disciplines. The climate of exchange between the papers at the conference spawned some interesting discussions around archaeology's unique perspective on the material world in addressing the burdens of modernism. Archaeology has never been more relevant. There was even some critical engagement with terms such as embodiment and agency, which are weighed down by the very conceptual problems they are intended to transcend. These are all good things.

There were synergies between many of the concerns discussed in the papers and what we are doing here in our Metamedia Lab and with Symmetrical Archaeology – Renfrew's articulation of mixtures between mind/matter; issues of distributed cognition and moving beyond representation in Lambros Malafouris's work; Janet Keller's work with writing media in a community from the southwest Pacific; Chris Gosden's attention to sensorial emotion and aesthetics. But the conference did lack a few things that can be extended to the discipline as a whole.

First, where was the concern for epistemology? – constructing secure knowledge that runs against the

grain of most conventional understanding of the way society and culture works. How do issues of material action play out through the instrumentalities and media involved in our own processes of knowledge construction? And second, if we are to transcend the problems of modernism then we must not only say we are doing it but, do it!

(Although a notable exception was Terje Gansum's excellent work coming out of his apprenticeship with a blacksmith [check out: 2004. "Role the bones – from iron to steel" Norwegian Archaeological Review. 37(1) 41-58]).

If we are to move beyond issues of representation, for example, then we must begin to do so in our own modes of articulation. Only in this way, will we be able to avoid the revolving doors and move around the burdens of modernism.

I asked Chris to say what some of the topics were.

Lambros Malafouris dealt with Mycenaean Linear B.. John Robb claims that he uses a hybrid concept of agency in close reading of decorative styles in Southern Italian Neolithic pottery. Preucel developed a Piercian

semiotic line on Peublo Revolt architecture. Some papers were very good in their focus on the materials such as the Mads Holst piece on the early bronze age barrows of southern Scandinavia, but there was no engagement with the mind/matter issue. Renfrew freely admits he is looking for a methodology to develop his theory of material engagement.

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Early days still for these archaeologists. I didn't get the sense that anyone except for Tim Ingold and maybe Gosden was concerned with the eventual outcome of this move beyond mind/matter… I mean what are the wider ramifications of the "Death of Man" and the simultaneous "Birth of Nature"?

It all sounds very abstract and specialized, and it is. There is also that infuriating tendency of academic papers to fail to come clean with a clear point or argument – they set up great questions and topics ("we are here to reconcile mind and matter in an archaeology of the distibuted mind, explored through … ) and then when you get to hear or read the piece, well yes they talk about reconciling mind and matter in an archaeology of the distributed mind … .

Nevertheless I do think that this development of an archaeology of mind is most important. I commented on Colin Renfrew's fascinating new explorations earlier this year – [Link] I am convinced that an archaeology of mind that brings together cultural anthropology, cognitive science and design studies will be the basis of the first reevaluation of our overall understanding of prehistory since new

archaeology revitalized cultural evolution in the 1960s.

Well ok I would say this – my next book is precisely an archaeology of mind that aims to rewrite 50 thousand years of prehistory – but really, all credit to this conference and its participants for pursuing the future of archaeological thought.